

Downtown Master Streetscape Plan

for

Harrisonburg, VA

Draft Revised

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I. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

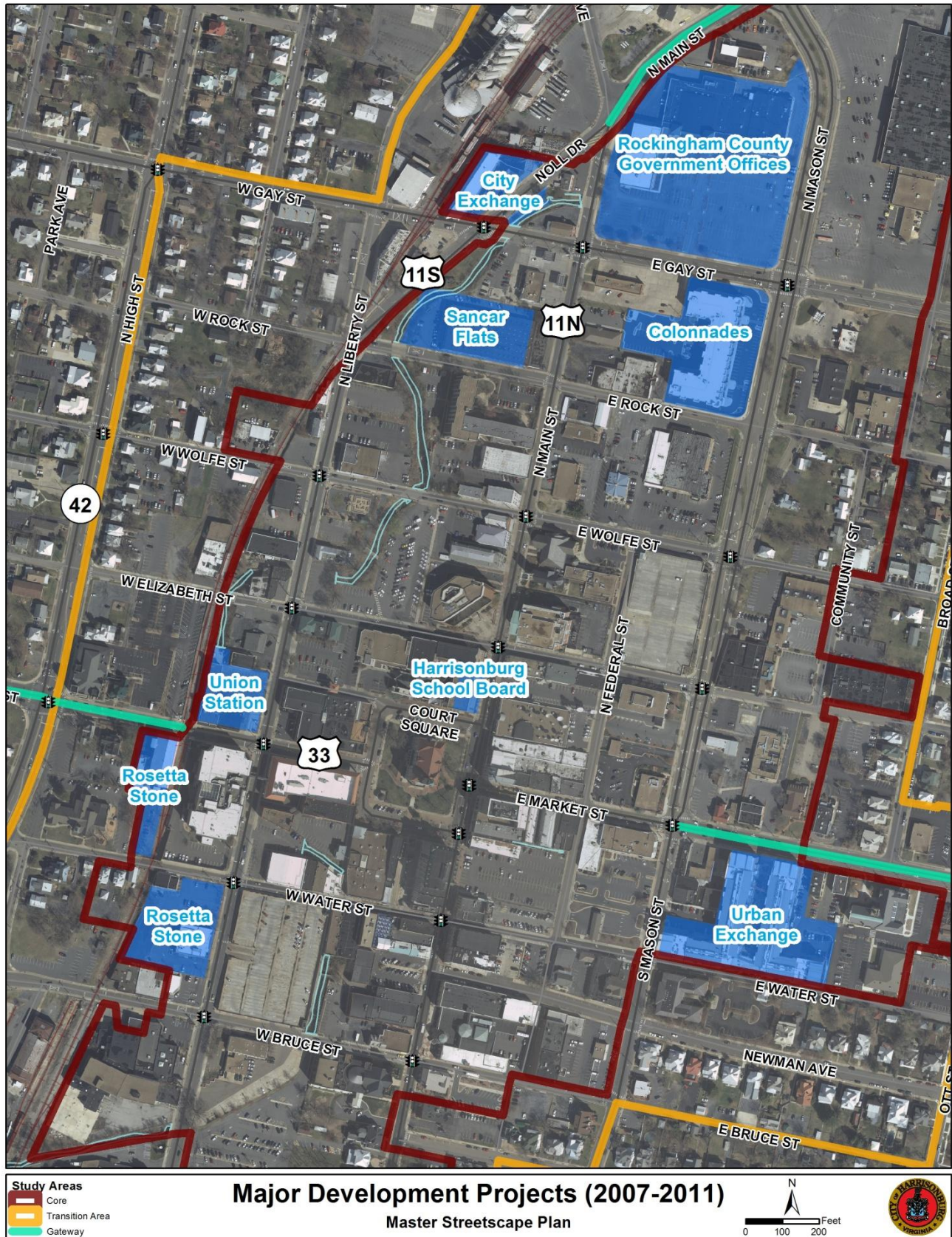
This Downtown Master Streetscape Plan is the City of Harrisonburg's attempt to further the landmark work already performed on the Streetscape Plan that was developed by Frazier Associates in 2003-2004 and adopted in 2005 by City Council. The Streetscape Plan was a groundbreaking effort to provide a vision to guide City decision making in hardscape material choices, conceptual designs and landscaping materials. The previous streetscape work downtown had been undertaken in the 1970s and by the early 2000s it was outdated and in need of significant repair. Since 2005, the City has implemented features of the Plan including streetscape work on the east side of S. Main Street between Bruce Street and Elizabeth Street; sidewalk enhancements on W. Bruce Street between S. Main and S. Liberty Streets; W. Market Street from High Street to Liberty Street and E. Water Street from S. Main Street to S. Federal Street. The City has placed substantial utilities underground along the Water Street corridor between Mason and Liberty Streets.

Increasing investment interest in the downtown area is evidenced by a number of major development projects since 2007, including projects such as: the renovation of the Wetsel Seed Building on Noll Drive and conversion into a restaurant and residential housing known as "City Exchange"; new construction known as "Urban Exchange" on E. Market Street just east of its intersection with Mason Street; the renovation of the Wetsel Seed Building on N. Liberty Street now housing "Union Station" as offices, retail storefronts, and a restaurant; the expansion of Rosetta Stone with the restoration of the Wetsel Seed Warehouse and the Old Creamery Building once occupied by the Harrisonburg Police Department; and the construction of a mixed use residential and commercial complex along N. Mason Street called the "Colonnades". The City also undertook the implementation of a citywide "wayfinding" sign program to assist visitors as they seek destinations in downtown among other landmark destinations.

Along with these improvements, many conceptual plans have been developed in the downtown corridor, including: a new parking deck structure on E. Elizabeth Street in the rear of Harrison Plaza; day lighting Blacks Run between W. Bruce Street and S. Liberty Street and constructing an amphitheater where the expansive Municipal Parking Lot now stands; renovating the old Cassco Ice Plant on S. Liberty Street; and restoring the vacant Chesapeake & Western Railway Offices on W. Bruce Street.

The significant redevelopment of downtown and the evolution and crystallization of new plans signify an important reality – scarce public resources should be spent wisely and a comprehensive plan is needed to communicate the collective vision for the cultural center of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham community. This plan is not intended to replace, but rather further the work already performed in the 2005 Streetscape Plan. This plan also intends to communicate a clear and concise vision for the central business district and the immediate surrounding areas, listed here as "transition areas". With the expansion of development opportunities in the central business district, it is only to be expected that redevelopment and revitalization of the transition areas will unfold in a matter of years.

Without a comprehensive downtown streetscape plan, public interest may be underserved; forethought not given to future needs and growth stymied instead of nurtured. Conversely, it should be recognized that this is a plan, and one which requires alteration from time to time due to economic realities, private investment and public sentiment.



Since 2005, many historic structures have been demolished in the historic district. Harrisonburg differs from many other Virginia communities that have fostered substantial preservation and revitalization programs focused on retaining historic structures. While the City does have an established historic district, it is one of the few in Virginia that does not have any design standards accompanying the designation. In that respect, revitalization has taken a different approach for this community. This plan does not attempt to establish any design standards for private physical structures, though this has been indicated as a goal of the City's 2011 Comprehensive Plan.

There are multiple planning documents that serve to govern different aspects of public infrastructure in and surrounding the immediate central business district. Some of these plans are conceptual in nature and not officially adopted as "plans" that could govern public infrastructure investment and private development partnership. Some of the requirements and recommendations in these plans are in reference to the city-at-large and do not address the specific needs and conditions in downtown. Additionally, not all of these plans have been adopted by City Council.

- Comprehensive Plan – This document presents the vision of the kind of community the City would like to be in the future and the goals that need to be reached to achieve it. The Downtown Area is referred throughout the Comprehensive Plan (Chapter 8, Historic Resources; Chapter 11, Transportation; Chapter 13, Economic Development & Tourism, Chapter 14, Revitalization), but no specific plans or projects are discussed. This plan has been adopted by City Council.
- Harrisonburg Downtown Streetscape Plan, 2005 – Created by the Downtown Revitalization and Streetscape Advisory Committee, this document puts forth a phased improvement plan for the downtown area. Improvements to features such as sidewalks, street lighting, and benches are outlined along with strategies for parking, pedestrian safety, and way finding. The plan also establishes sub-districts within downtown based on varied defining characteristics. This plan has been adopted by City Council.
- Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan – This document details existing policies and facilities for bicycle and pedestrian traffic in Harrisonburg and puts forth priority infrastructure improvement projects and the means by which they are to be achieved. This plan has been adopted by City Council.
- Capital Improvement Plan – A product of planning work completed by city departments, this document lays out infrastructure improvement projects for which departments wish to have monies allocated during the next 5 years. If funding for major improvements in the downtown area cannot be obtained through grants, it is typically requested in the Capital Improvement Plan. Decisions as to which plans are funded each year are made by City Council.
- Design & Construction Standards Manual (DCSM) – This manual defines guidelines and standards for public facilities constructed in the City and has been adopted by City Council.
- Zoning Code – The City's zoning code defines the B-1 Central Business District, which is generally identified as the downtown area. This code has been adopted by City Council.

- Parking Plan for Downtown Harrisonburg – Completed in 2009 as the successor of many downtown parking plans, this document identifies downtown parking needs, opportunities for new parking infrastructure, and financing opportunities for them.
- Downtown Vision by Eugene Stoltzfus – Architect Eugene Stoltzfus’ presentation and supplemental book portray a vision for the downtown area by suggesting ways to improve existing facilities and develop in a manner that will ultimately make downtown a more attractive and pedestrian friendly location. This document is not adopted by City Council, although it appears that the public perceives it as the “city’s plan”.

There are several issues regarding the downtown that are not addressed by existing plans, creating difficulties for city government:

- How to integrate regular and routine maintenance projects to accommodate a collective vision compatible with the many viewpoints in the downtown area;
- Implementation of the City’s Streetscape Plan and components of it are being accomplished in a piecemeal fashion and may be moving ahead without full consideration of other utilities and infrastructure needs;
- How to communicate streetscape standards and plans to prospective developers desiring to locate within the B-1 zoning classification;
- How to finance additional parking and where to strategically place it in an easily accessible location adjacent to transportation facilities that can accommodate the traffic volumes;
- How to manage a growing solid waste problem for downtown businesses that require refuse collection outside of the city’s business model.

This plan aims to address these issues by synthesizing and expanding upon existing documents to develop a long-term achievable plan for the downtown area. This includes the expansion of the work completed in the Streetscape Plan to larger study area, providing a practical guide for public improvements on each downtown roadway, and communicating these plans to the development community to share project costs amongst stakeholder groups.

This plan’s overall goal is straightforward: **To present an easily communicable, comprehensive vision for public spaces in Downtown Harrisonburg that can be utilized by public and private agencies in guiding planning efforts.**

GOALS

1. Develop a comprehensive vision for all streets in the study area to develop public and private expectation for project elements.
2. Provide a plan for multi-modal transportation, emphasizing pedestrian & bicycle accommodations.
3. Provide sufficient parking to support downtown business and visitor needs.
4. Enhance public transportation facilities to accommodate citizens and visitors.
5. Develop a plan for public services in the downtown area that addresses the changing needs of businesses.

6. Plan for necessary improvements to public & private utility infrastructure.
7. Partner with property owners and community stakeholders to provide opportunities for development or redevelopment of public & private downtown properties.
8. Expand recreational opportunities in the downtown core.

CHALLENGES

There are significant planning challenges that make Harrisonburg's downtown unique:

1. Downtown is bisected east to west by U.S. Route 33 and north to south by U.S. Route 11. As U.S. 11 serves as a secondary primary route to Interstate 81, frequent interstate traffic diversions push heavy traffic volumes through downtown.
2. Court Square acts as a quasi-traffic circle where tractor trailers and larger delivery vehicles have difficulty negotiating turns.
3. Blacks Run traverses through downtown and in many cases has been "tunneled" underneath buildings, parking lots and streets.
4. The Southern Railway runs along the west side of downtown where most streets cross at-grade with the rail tracks. The only grade separated crossing is a wooden bridge structure on W. Water Street owned by Norfolk Southern that has a weight restriction.
5. There is a perception of insufficient parking infrastructure throughout the downtown core during weekday business hours.
6. Predominantly, the area "North of Market" was redeveloped in the 1960s through urban renewal efforts, which resulted in the demolition of neighborhoods and historic structures replaced with shopping centers with minimal landscaping. This building stock is aging and in need of renovation, restoration or replacement.
7. There are many commissions, boards and committees that have purview for items in the downtown, but overlapping responsibilities or unclear directives/lack of revenue create uncertainty about authority.
8. Harrisonburg's downtown was developed with narrow streets and consequently, narrow sidewalks. While there is an abundance of sidewalks throughout downtown that provide adequate connectivity, in many cases, sidewalks are narrow and encumbered with light poles, traffic signal poles, street furniture, and private advertising.
9. Many downtown residents are dependent on transit services to provide basic transportation needs. The central transfer station has been relocated from the Hardesty-Higgins House on Bruce Street to a parking lot in a shopping complex on the north end of downtown. While this location is more proximate to the users that transit serves, this is not a permanent location for a transfer station in the downtown area.

10. Downtown is served by some of the oldest public utility infrastructure in the City. Providing adequate water and sewer capacity is essential for continued economic growth and to maintain Needed Fire Flow (NFF) requirements for existing and new structures.
11. Public trash collection is provided between Monday and Friday by the City. Many restaurant establishments require additional trash collection resources that the City currently does not provide. There are currently no refuse storage areas in downtown and trash clutters sidewalks.
12. Greenway concepts exist both north and south of downtown. Bringing a dedicated greenway through downtown to connect these pose a challenge due to urban density and narrow streets and the need to acquire additional property or convert on-street parking.

PLANNING PROCESS

This plan is overseen by the City of Harrisonburg Department of Public Works, Department of Planning & Community Development, Department of Economic Development, and City Manager's Office. To establish a baseline format for a Master Streetscape Plan and understand challenges that may be involved in such an undertaking, Public Works staff researched the work completed in comparable localities. Through this process, it became apparent that localities with master plans for their downtown viewed the resulting document as an invaluable planning tool for achieving coordinated streetscape improvements, especially when care is taken to define a unified vision that is supportable by the community-at-large.

Taking heed of these findings, the Master Streetscape Plan Committee was formed to help represent the myriad of stakeholders involved in this effort so that ideas can be vetted in a small group atmosphere during the various stages of the planning process.

The Committee includes the following members:

- *Department of Public Works* – Drew Williams, Brad Reed, Thanh Dang
- *Department of Planning & Community Development* – Stacy Turner, Adam Fletcher
- *Department of Economic Development* – Brian Shull
- *City Manager's Office* – Ande Banks
- *Department of Public Transportation* – Reggie Smith
- *Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance* – Eddie Bumbaugh
- *Downtown Merchants (citizens)* – Gary Stiteler (Glen's Fair Price), Brandon Amstutz (Downtown Fine Furniture), Dave Miller (Dave's Taverna Restaurant)

This group had its first meeting in July 2010, wherein city staff gave an introduction to the Master Streetscape Plan concept, discussed the concept of a downtown merchant survey, and gathered input on how to redesign W. Bruce Street corridor between S. Liberty Street and S. Main Street when it was repaved.

To gather preliminary input from a broader stakeholder group, a survey of downtown businesses was conducted in September 2010 to gather suggestions and concerns related to public infrastructure. The results of the survey were used to formulate the scope of work for the plan. In January 2011, the Master Streetscape Plan Committee met again to discuss the survey results, share the scope of work, and to collaboratively perform a 'SWOT' analysis for each of the subsections of the plan's study area. Building upon this assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and

Threats (SWOT) by the Committee, staff prepared its own analysis for each of the sections of the plan. Public Works then hosted a series of meetings in February 2011 to discuss the needs of individual city departments.

Using the information gathered from these meetings, staff developed the draft Master Streetscape Plan. This draft will be shared with the Committee for input, updated, and then brought before the community in a public input meeting. Comments collected from this meeting will be discussed by the Committee, and then integrated into the final draft of the plan.

The final draft will be shared to the Harrisonburg Planning Commission presentation to request their endorsement of the plan. When their endorsement has been received, staff will present the plan to City Council to request adoption. Once adopted, it is intended that the Master Streetscape Plan be called out by the city's Comprehensive Plan and Design and Construction Standards Manual, so that the plan's recommendations can be referenced by the community.

STUDY AREA

The plan addresses three differentiated, but connected study areas:

- Downtown Core – Commonly referred to as the central business district, this area comprises all parcels with the B-1, mixed use zoning classification, as of the publish date of this plan
- Downtown Transition Area – This area encompasses the parcels identified in the latest version of the Comprehensive Plan's Land Use section as being intended for future mixed use development as well as any other core-adjacent areas where streetscape improvements are recommended
- Downtown Gateways – This includes the portions of major street corridors (Route 11 and Route 33) that provide access to the downtown area and are recommended for streetscape improvements

